

A Search

A team from the Hawaii-based U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory journeyed to remote Kwajalein Atoll to search for the remains of airmen and marines missing since World War II.

for the

Missing

Story by Peter Rejcek • Photos by Steve Harding

BEN Carson knows his nine comrades are on Kwajalein. The marines, nearly forgotten by history, were executed by Japanese troops six decades ago and are buried somewhere on the distant Pacific atoll.

But where?

Finding the answer to that question fell to Dr. Greg Fox and his team from the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii. CILHI is a mixture of about 250 Army, Navy, Marine and Air Force personnel and Department of Army civilians tasked with locating, recovering and identifying the remains of U.S. service members from around the globe.

While its mission is heavily concentrated in Southeast Asia and on the Vietnam War period, CILHI also goes after service members lost during World War II, the

Korean War and the Cold War.

That mission brought them to Kwajalein in early January, to an empty field across the street from a memorial Japanese cemetery at the far western end of the three-mile-long island. Now home to America's Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Test Site, in February 1944 the atoll was a major Japanese outpost and the focus of an air, land and sea assault by U.S. forces.

The story of the fallen and forgotten marines, however, goes back almost another two years. On Aug. 17 and 18, 1942, 222 Marine commandos, known as Raiders, under Col. Evans Carlson staged an amphibious assault on Makin Atoll in the former Gilbert Islands (now the Republic of Kiribati), several hundred miles southeast of Kwajalein.

The raid was intended as a morale booster for the nation, which had yet to catch up to the Axis powers in military might. The marines, carried deep into enemy territory in two submarines, later returned to a hero's welcome in Hawaii. In hindsight, the raid caused

little real damage, and prompted the Japanese to fortify their installations across the Pacific, making the later U.S. campaign to retake the region far more difficult.

The attack on Makin left nearly a score of Carlson's Raiders dead and another dozen missing. According to military records in the National Archives, the records of a postwar war-crimes tribunal in Guam, and testimonials from Japanese officers and Marshallese witnesses, nine of those MIAs probably died on Kwajalein.

"This is a strange feeling. I never thought I would be standing on the ground where these guys got the ultimate punishment," said Carson, 78, a vigorous man with a friendly round face and sharp eyes behind glasses that



More on Kwaj!

For more about living on Kwajalein, see our July issue.

Peter Rejcek is the associate editor of the Reagan Test Site's Kwajalein Hourglass newspaper.



(Above) Louis Zamperini, a WWII prisoner of the Japanese on Kwajalein, looks on as Dr. Greg Fox (center) and Dr. Karl Kuttruff, site manager for the U.S. and Marshallese governments, examine a newly exposed part of the site.

(Right) 2LT Virgil A. Tramelli, who appears third from the right, lower row, in this wartime photo, was probably executed on Kwajalein along with his crew. Businessman Jim Tramelli journeyed to Kwajalein to help in the search for the aviators' remains.

seem a little too big. Carson was a member of that 1942 raid — and has been one of its biggest critics ever since. He's long campaigned against what he calls the "Hollywoodization" of the raid and has been a driving force in the recovery of the Makin Raiders on Kwajalein.

Carson was flown to Kwajalein in January by National Geographic, which is producing an episode about CILHI for an eight-part TV series called "Riddles of the Dead."





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The long and painstaking search required the CILHI team to move several tons of sand and soil, all of which had to be carefully screened for human remains.

Accompanying Carson was Louis Zamperini, a 1936 Olympian who ended up on Kwajalein as a prisoner of war in 1943 after spending more than a month adrift at sea when his Army Air Forces B-24 was shot down over the Pacific. During his 42-day incarceration — "the worst 42 days of my life," as he tells it — he saw the names of the nine marines scribbled on the wall of his prison cell. Zamperini memorized those names before being shipped to Tokyo as a war trophy, spared the sword thanks to his Olympic celebrity.

"Those names were like family," Zamperini said.

The CILHI excavation, in fact, even drew the interest of a relative of one of the missing servicemen. St. Louis businessman Jim Tramelli traversed the Pacific in hopes the team would also uncover the remains of his uncle, 2nd Lt. Virgil A. Tramelli, a B-24 navigator who, along with his crew, may also have been executed on Kwaj. CILHI historians believe as many as three B-24 crews may have perished here, executed like the marines, before the 1944 U.S. invasion.

"This has been a big part of my life," said Tramelli, who spent his one week on a tropical island shoveling dirt and sifting through rocks, hoping to bring home his uncle after nearly 60 years. Tramelli has spent more than a decade researching every



CILHI team member SSG Matt Caster sifts dirt excavated from the search site through a mesh screen, which will trap even the smallest artifacts and bone fragments.

known aspect of his uncle's life and death.

"I know he is here, because I've read it," he said. "It's embedded in me."

But the hopes of Carson, Zamperini, Tramelli and others, combined with the meticulous research and excavation by the CILHI team, were not enough to find the missing American servicemen. After more than two months of scraping, digging, shoveling and sifting through tons of earth — even digging into roads — excavators only found a smattering of remains and a handful of artifacts. Exhausted and out of options, the team called it quits in mid-March.

"We don't come up empty in our worldwide recovery missions very often," said Fox, the lead archaeologist on the team. "It was disappointing."

But the book is not closed on the Makin Raiders just yet. Fox said CILHI historians will return to the archives to see if they can ferret out any additional clues. After all, it took CILHI three tries before it located the remains of the 19 dead marines left on Makin Atoll after the raid. The mass grave, it turned out, was underneath a road, less than 100 meters from an earlier excavation site.

Those remains were repatriated to Hawaii in December 1999. All of the remains were identified by CILHI. Six of the marines were sent home for burial in the summer of 2001 to locations decided on by the individual families. The other 13 marines were buried in Arlington National cemetery in August of 2001.

Fox hopes for a similar outcome with the Marine Raiders buried on Kwaj.

"We spent considerable resources on it, and nobody likes to quit, myself included," he said. "My organization is very persistent."

And Carson, undeterred, added: "There's still hope." □